

REPORT TO CABINET

DATE 16 OCTOBER 2025

**REPORT OF CORPORATE
MANAGEMENT TEAM**

CABINET DECISION

Children and Young People - Lead Cabinet Member – Councillor Claire Besford

**Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision
(AP) strategy 2025-2030**

Summary

This report provides an overview of the updated SEND and AP strategy for 2025-2030 for the local area partnership. The local area partnership brings together children, young people, parents, carers, education, health and social care services, all of whom share responsibility for the strategic commissioning, management, delivery and evaluation of arrangements for children and young people with SEND aged 0-25 years and those who may require alternative provision in Stockton-on-Tees.

Reasons for Recommendation(s)/Decision(s)

The SEND and AP strategy for Stockton-on-Tees has been produced in the context of the statutory requirements for the local area outlined in the Children and Families Act and SEND Code of Practice which are in place to ensure that children and young people with SEND receive the support they need to achieve their potential.

The SEND and AP Strategy for Stockton-on-Tees is for children and young people with SEND aged 0-25, or who are educated in alternative provision, parents and carers and the professionals who work with them across the health, education and care system. The strategy supports priorities within the Stockton-on-Tees plan, particularly priority one – the best start in life to achieve big ambitions.

Recommendations

1. Cabinet is asked to approve the SEND and AP strategy for the local area.

Detail

Local and National Context

1. A 2024 report¹ commissioned by the Local Government Association and County Councils network highlighted the breadth of challenges that are currently facing the SEND system nationally. The report described the current SEND system as reaching breaking point, driven by key factors including:

- More children than ever before are being identified as having SEND, with the rise in the number of pupils in schools with Education, Health and Care plans far outstripping the overall rise of the school population.
 - More children and young people with SEND have needs that are not met in mainstream education and require specialist provision, with a corresponding substantial rise in placements in independent and non-maintained special schools of 132%.
 - More money than ever before is being invested in the SEND system, but this is not keeping pace with what is being spent (the high needs funding deficit), representing significant budget pressures for local authorities, education and health services.
 - Outcomes for children and young people with SEND overall have not improved.
2. A government schools' white paper is expected to be published in the Autumn which will outline the detail of intended reforms to the SEND system. The SEND and AP strategy has been developed with a clear set of guiding priorities and commitments, with sufficient flexibility to be able to respond to the coming changes of the SEND landscape following the publishing of the white paper.
3. Over the last 12 months a process of self-evaluation, benchmarking, refresh of our Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and development of our local area inclusion plan has deepened our understanding of the needs of our children and young people with SEND and those who may require alternative provision, and the challenges that are facing our local system including:
- The number of children and young people with SEND is projected to rise across all educational settings (mainstream, special and resourced provision) over the coming years.
 - Pupils with EHC and SEND support plans have consistently higher absence rates than those with no identified SEND.
 - There is an attainment gap between children and young people with SEND and their peers across every phase of education.
 - Our local system partners are reporting that needs for children are emerging earlier and becoming more complex.
 - There is a high demand for health services, reflected in waiting times for specialist services such as speech and language therapy, and the number of children and young people on the neurodevelopmental pathway.
 - Increased demand and financial pressure across children's social care, SEND high needs funding and adult social care services.
4. Action to address these challenges over the past 12 months include:
- We have worked in partnership with schools, stakeholders, parents and carers to transform our current enhanced mainstream provision model into additional resourced provision and SEND units. This has created 155 school places which will provide children and young people with the support they need in the borough.
 - We have expanded our holiday and term-time activities to offer children and young people with SEND the opportunity to take part in positive activities within their communities. Over our easter and summer holidays are fun activities in 2025, there were 1066 SEND specific places available offering activities including swimming, gymnastics, quiet climbing sessions and creative activities.
 - We have carried out a comprehensive review and reshaping of our alternative provision model. Our new model is now fully staffed and will focus on providing robust support at an earlier stage. In addition, we have increased the range and quality of AP within the borough.
 - We have worked collaboratively with parents, carers, children, young people and stakeholders to develop pathways to provide early identification and support, which

are embedded as part of our schools graduated response. Our speech and language pathway, developed as part of the Stockton-on-Tees Talks Programme, has provided early intervention which has reduced or closed the gap for 500 children in the early years identified with gaps in their language development.

- We have committed to the implementation of the I-Thrive Framework for system change, as an integrated, person centred, and needs led approach to delivering mental health services for children, young people and families. Early mental health support is through dedicated mental health support teams in schools which currently provide evidence-based interventions into 40 settings and have resulted in children receiving mental health support much earlier without lengthy waits and with improved mental health outcomes.
 - We have produced an inclusive education framework (mainstream practice) which details the minimum expectations for what should be ordinarily available to support children with additional needs in schools and settings from early years through to post 16.
5. The local area partnership is clear that there is more to do to ensure that outcomes improve in the context of also addressing demand and financial pressures across the system. This intelligence and information has been used to inform our strategic direction as a local area partnership and has fed through into the priorities and commitments of the SEND and AP Strategy.

Strategy Development and Priorities

6. During 2025 strategy priorities and commitments have been co-developed with the Stockton youth forum and over one hundred children and young people, The Stockton parent carer forum alongside parents and carers and key partners including education settings, health, and care professionals. This collaborative process involved a comprehensive range of consultation activity including stakeholder meetings, surveys, face to face engagement and SEND focused events across the borough to develop the strategy priorities and commitments.
7. Four priorities guide the strategy which are based on key outcomes that support preparation for adulthood:
- Being as healthy as possible.
 - Building relationships with friends, family, and the community.
 - Developing independence.
 - Accessing quality education, training, and employment opportunities.
8. Each priority has a set of partnership commitments that have been developed directly from consultation and collaboration across the local area partnership.

Governance

9. The draft strategy has been out for public consultation during July – September. Information gathered from public consultation has informed which commitments are prioritised during the first year of the strategy. An annual action plan will be led by the multiagency SEND Operational group, detailing how the local partnership will deliver on the commitments, including key milestones and measures that will track the impact that we are making. Scrutiny and oversight of progress against the plan will be provided through the SEND Strategic Group.

Community Impact and Equality and Poverty Impact Assessment

10. An Equality and Poverty Impact Assessment has been completed. No groups with protected characteristics will be negatively impacted by the implementation of the strategy. Individuals with a disability, experiencing pregnancy and maternity may be positively impacted by the strategy.

Corporate Parenting Implications

11. The Stockton-on-Tees JSNA highlights that children who are in contact with social care are more likely than their peers to have SEND, influenced by experiences of trauma or neglect. The SEND and AP strategy supports the Stockton-on-Tees care leavers offer through the development of commitments including post 16 opportunities.

Financial Implications

12. The SEND and AP strategy for Stockton-on-Tees has been produced in the context of escalating financial pressures on the Council's dedicated schools grant and general fund budgets. High Needs funding is received by the local authority through the dedicated schools grant (DSG) which is monitored and reported through to corporate management team and cabinet as appropriate. The rising demands on SEND provision has also impacted on the Council's general fund budget, particularly in relation to Home to School Transport services.
13. At the end of the 2024/25 financial year the Council reported a deficit of £6.72m against the DSG. The Council is not alone in facing these significant and on-going financial challenges against the dedicated schools grant, as this is pressure across many Councils nationally.

Legal Implications

14. The SEND and AP strategy for Stockton-on-Tees has been produced in the context of the statutory requirements for the local area outlined in the Children and Families Act and SEND Code of Practice which are in place to ensure that children and young people with SEND receive the support they need to achieve their potential².

Risk Assessment

15. The SEND and AP strategy implementation will be managed through existing governance structures (SEND Operational group and SEND Strategic group).

Wards Affected and Consultation with Ward/ Councillors (refer to Concordat for Communication and Consultation with Members)

16. The draft SEND and AP strategy 2025-2030 will support children, young people, parents and carers across all wards of the Borough. The strategy has been out for public consultation during July – September.

Background Papers

15. Draft SEND and AP Strategy 2025-2030

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